

The Philosophy of Affordances — Manuel Heras-Escribano

Chapters 1–2 Summary and Notes

Source:

Heras-Escribano, M. (2019). *The Philosophy of Affordances*. Springer International Publishing. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Overview

- The text aims to clarify the **philosophical status of affordances** within ecological psychology
 - **Affordances** are defined as possibilities for action available to agents within their environments
 - The opening chapters examine the conceptual foundations of this idea, focusing on ontology, agency, normativity, and perception
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Key Research Questions

Ontology:

What is the nature of affordances—are they properties, relations, or dispositions?

Normativity:

Do affordances possess an inherent "ought," implying that some actions are more fitting or appropriate than others?

Agency:

How do agents perceive, choose, and act upon affordances?

Perceptual Content:

What is directly perceived in interaction with the environment?

The book proposes a **dispositional (Rylean) account** that treats affordances as tendencies or potentials in the environment, realized when agents with suitable capacities engage with them.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Core Concepts

- **Affordances:** Relational possibilities for action grounded in both environmental structure and agent capability
 - **Ecological Psychology:** Gibson's framework emphasizing direct perception and the mutual coupling of organism and environment
 - **Direct Perception:** The idea that affordances are detected directly through environmental structure, without internal symbolic inference
 - **Organism–Environment System:** The fundamental unit of analysis in ecological psychology; perception and action arise from this dynamic coupling
 - **Dispositional Account:** Affordances are environmental dispositions manifested when compatible agent capacities are present
 - **Normativity:** Affordances may imply appropriateness or correctness of action
 - **Agency:** The capacity of living systems to perceive and act upon affordances meaningfully
 - **Ontology:** The metaphysical question concerning what affordances are and how they exist
 - **Perceptual Information:** Structured environmental patterns (light, texture, sound) that specify affordances
 - **Enactivism (contrast):** A related view emphasizing autonomous sense-making; differs in its treatment of perception and representation
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Chapter 2 – Ecological Psychology

Historical Foundations

Originated with **J. J. Gibson**, influenced by:

- **Pragmatism** (James, Dewey) – cognition as adaptive action
- **Gestalt Psychology** – holistic perception of structured environments
- **Behaviorism** – focus on observable interaction
- **Phenomenology** – attention to lived, first-person experience

Key Distinction:

- Ecological psychology rejects traditional cognitivism, which posits that perception depends on internal mental representations
- It maintains that the environment itself provides structured, information-rich stimuli that organisms can perceive directly

Core Principles

Embodiment

Cognition is bodily and grounded in the physical structure and movement capabilities of the organism.

Situatedness

- Cognitive processes occur within specific environmental, social, and cultural contexts
- Following Dewey, cognition develops through reciprocal interaction: the organism modifies its environment, which in turn shapes further adaptation

Perception–Action Reciprocity

Perception and action are inseparable; perception guides action, and action refines perception.

Direct Perception

Environmental structures (light, sound, surface patterns) specify real-world properties without inferential mediation.

Organism–Environment System

The coupled relationship forms the primary level of analysis; perception and action cannot be studied in isolation.

Affordances in Context

- Affordances are **relational possibilities** emerging from the interaction of environmental features and organismic abilities (effectivities)
- A single object offers different affordances to different organisms depending on their capacities and perspectives
- **Example:** A chair affords sitting for an adult but not for a toddler who cannot reach it

Ecological Information

Definition: Structured patterns in ambient energy (light, sound, texture) that specify environmental properties and affordances.

Key Characteristics:

- **Specificity:** The relationship between ecological information and environmental properties is lawful and reliable, not arbitrary
 - **Perceptual Learning:** Through development and experience, organisms calibrate and refine sensitivity to affordances
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Comparative Frameworks

Perspective	Core Focus	Relation to Ecological Psychology
Enactivism	Sense-making, autonomy, active participation	Shares embodiment and situatedness but treats perception as co-constituted by agent goals
Phenomenology	Lived experience and intentionality	Similar emphasis on direct experience; less empirical
Representationalism	Internal models and computation	Opposed; ecological psychology rejects representational mediation

Current Challenges

- Providing a precise ontological definition of affordances
 - Accounting for perceptual error and miscalibration
 - Explaining how normativity arises in a naturalistic framework
 - Clarifying how ecological information functions without invoking internal representations
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Conceptual Glossary

Term	Definition
Affordance	Possibility for action offered by the environment relative to organismal capacities

Ecological Psychology	Theory emphasizing direct perception and organism–environment coupling
Direct Perception	Detection of affordances through structured environmental information, not inference
Organism–Environment System	Integrated unit where perception and action co-emerge
Dispositional Account	View that affordances are environmental tendencies realized through compatible agents
Normativity	The dimension of correctness or appropriateness in affordance use
Agency	The ability to perceive, select, and act upon available affordances
Ontology	Inquiry into the being or nature of affordances
Perceptual Information	Structured environmental data specifying affordances
Effectivity	The organism's repertoire of action capabilities relevant to affordances
Specificity	Reliable correspondence between ecological information and environmental structure
Perceptual Learning	Process of refining detection and calibration to affordances through experience
Embodiment	Grounding of cognition in bodily structure and movement
Situated Cognition	Dependence of cognition on environmental and cultural context

Pragmatism	Philosophical influence emphasizing practical interaction and adaptation
Gestalt Psychology	Influence highlighting holistic, patterned perception
Phenomenology	Perspective centered on lived, first-person perception

Illustrative Example: The Door Handle

Cognitivist Model:

Perception involves forming a mental representation of the door, recalling past knowledge ("handles are for pulling"), and deciding to act.

Ecological Model (Gibson / Heras-Escribano):

- The handle's physical characteristics—shape, orientation, height—directly specify pulling, pushing, or twisting actions
- Perception of these affordances is immediate and does not rely on inference

Relational Aspect:

The same door affords different actions depending on the agent's body scale and abilities (adult, child, wheelchair user).

Design Implication:

Effective design ensures that affordances are perceptually evident and aligned with user capabilities.

Summary of Main Insights

1. **Affordances constitute relational action possibilities** grounded in the structure of the environment and the effectivities of the organism
2. **Perception is direct**, relying on ecological information rather than internal representation

3. **The organism–environment system** is the proper analytical unit for understanding behavior and cognition
4. **Cognitive processes are situated and embodied**, shaped by evolutionary and environmental histories
5. **Affordances can be understood as dispositions** that become actualized through interaction between environment and agent

This framework bridges ecological psychology, philosophy of mind, and theories of embodied and situated cognition.

